Working Draft[1]

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Evidence-Driven Support: An Effective Approach to Improve TANF and Related Programs

Background

/ **The Administration for Children and Families (ACF)** is consistently seeking to improve training and technical assistance (TTA) for state, local, and Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and related programs that seek to use and build evidence to create more impactful and equitable programs.

/ **State, local, and Tribal TANF and related programs** want to maximize their participation in TTA. They want TTA that will help improve their programs in ways that can support better outcomes for program participants and their families.

/ **TTA providers** are always evolving to meet the needs of programs. They work to design and implement evidence-informed, inclusive, and relevant TTA activities and products that promote sustained improvements in TANF and related programs and can support better outcomes for program participants and their families.

/ **All of these groups** strive to promote economic security, equity, and well-being for children and families in the United States who are experiencing poverty. They work together to improve the ability of TANF and related programs to meet the needs of participants and their families.

A promising solution

Evidence-driven support is well-suited to address these goals and thereby improve the ability of TANF and related programs to address families' social and economic needs. Evidence-driven support helps programs use evidence to inform decisions. And when evidence does not yet exist, it helps create a framework for building an evidence base to update "what we know" and evidence of "what works." Specifically, evidence-driven support provides programs with skills and tools to use analytic methods to develop, test, and refine program changes—that is, to build evidence! TANF and related programs that use and build evidence to guide decisions can achieve more efficient, equitable services and better outcomes for their participants.

To use and build evidence effectively, TANF and related programs need the right kind of support.[2] This brief describes core components of evidence-driven support, including how it works and how it builds on foundational TTA activities like sharing knowledge and fostering connection. Project IMPROVE developed the evidence-driven support approach based on key insights from the fields of implementation science and behavioral change and decades of experience in supporting evidence-driven change in TANF and related

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[1] This brief is an evolving product being developed with ongoing input from state TANF programs and partners.

[2] For example, research shows trainings alone are not enough to improve practice or participant outcomes (Valenstein-Mah et al. 2020).

programs.[3] ACF and TANF and related programs can use the evidence-driven support approach to assess the TTA they fund or participate in, and TTA providers can use it to inform their work.

Core components of evidence-driven support

To provide evidence-driven support, TTA providers engage in all of the following actions:

/ **Share knowledge.** TTA providers bring an in-depth, up-to-date understanding of policies, research, and practices relevant to TANF and related programs—including equity considerations and cultural responsiveness. TTA providers share this knowledge with TTA participants through guidance, trainings, and written or virtual resources. Knowledge sharing is generally one-way and is best suited for clear-cut information like policy guidance. Sharing knowledge is important because leaders and staff in TANF and related programs may need the information to run their programs. It can also help the field benefit from and build on existing research about what does (and does not) work to improve programs and outcomes.

Exhibit 1. Core components of evidence-driven support
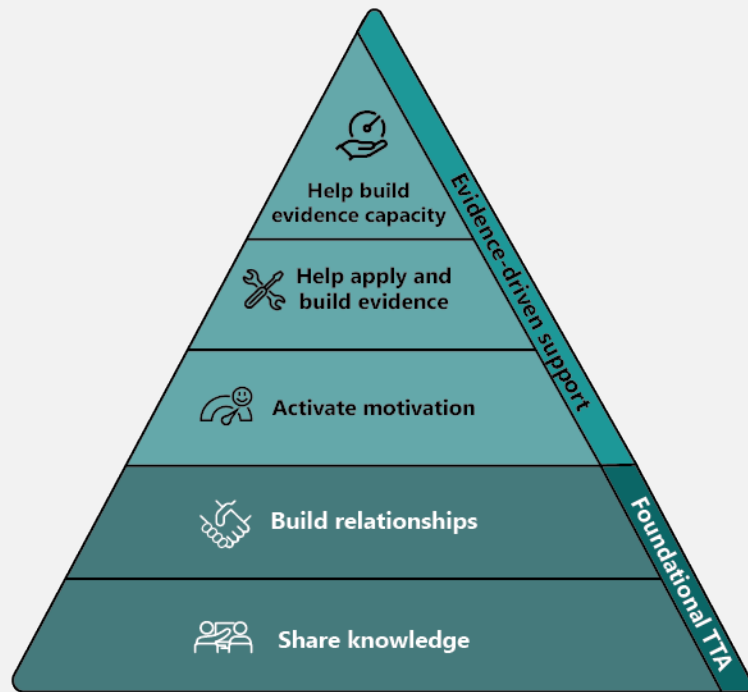
/ **Build relationships.** TTA providers address power differentials and cultivate connections and understanding that strengthen their relationships with TTA participants as well as TTA participants' relationships with each other and with content experts in the field. These relationships help programs effect positive change; enable TTA providers, TTA participants, and content experts to learn from one another; and help TTA participants build their own evidence capacity (Metz et al. 2020).

/ **Activate motivation.** TTA providers help TANF and related program leaders, staff, and organizations identify their purpose, refine their goals and objectives, and envision what is possible when engaging teams to create meaningful, lasting change. Activating motivation helps teams push through challenges, navigate partner differences, and achieve their full potential as individuals and as contributors to their organization (Kegan and Lahey 2009).

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[3] Project IMPROVE is seeking feedback on the evidence-driven support approach from staff and leaders in TANF and related programs and will update this draft brief based on their feedback.

/ **Help apply and build evidence.** TTA providers identify evidence relevant to the practice challenges TTA participants face. With humility and respect for the TTA participants' context and practice wisdom, TTA providers help TTA participants identify and interpret research and consider how to best apply it in their context. When relevant research does not yet exist, TTA providers guide TTA participants to use systematic methods to gather and analyze data—that is, to build evidence that can inform decision making and improve change.

/ **Help build evidence capacity.** TTA providers cultivate the individual, interpersonal, and organizational culture, infrastructure, engagement, human capital, and leadership that help organizations build and use evidence to inform decisions and their work (Mastri et al. 2022). Building evidence capacity helps ensure programs can make and sustain evidence-driven change on their own.

When we put these actions, or services, together, we get the theory of change shown in Exhibit 2. In particular, these TTA **services** can result in **behavioral changes** in TANF and related program leaders, staff, and organizations that may lead to improved **ultimate outcomes** for programs and program participants.

How does evidence-driven support enhance TTA?

Evidence-driven support builds on foundational, business-as-usual TTA to offer the following, additional benefits:

/ **It recognizes that the needs of TTA participants often go beyond knowledge gaps and therefore cannot be solved by training and relationship-building activities alone.** Lack of motivation and limited evidence capacity are common barriers to evidence-driven change (Scaccia et al. 2015). Therefore, TTA providers supporting TANF and related programs must also support the motivation and capacity of program leaders and staff members to engage in continuous, evidence-driven improvement.

/ **It provides tailored assistance to apply and build evidence.** To deliver evidence-driven support, TTA providers must develop a deep understanding of the participating TANF and related programs' contexts, goals, and current capacities. Then, they must adjust the content, delivery, timing, and intensity of TTA activities or services accordingly (Stanczyk et al. 2022). By tailoring support, TTA providers can better help TTA participants use and build evidence in their contexts.

/ **It reflects meaningful spheres of control, influence, and interest.** Many factors beyond the program and TTA provider's control shape the social and economic stability and well-being of people and families who participate in TANF and related programs. Evidence-driven support encourages a keen and explicit focus on the things programs and TTA providers can control—such as the services they offer—in the context of things they cannot control—such as local politics and economic forces. This framing encourages TTA providers and ACF to home in on the specific behavioral changes they expect to see in the leaders, staff, and programs that engage with TTA and address them directly through the services TTA providers offer.

/ **It provides a way to assess TTA return on investment.** To measure the effectiveness of TTA, TTA providers can look for behavior changes in TTA participants that can lead to improvements in programs and participant outcomes (Exhibit 2). For example, TTA providers might measure changes in TTA participants' knowledge about the TTA topic, motivation to make changes to improve their programs' effectiveness, or success implementing an evidence-informed practice (Michie et al. 2011). These changes create the conditions for improvements in TANF and related programs and, in turn, might lead to better outcomes for program participants and their families.

Exhibit 2. Evidence-driven support theory of change
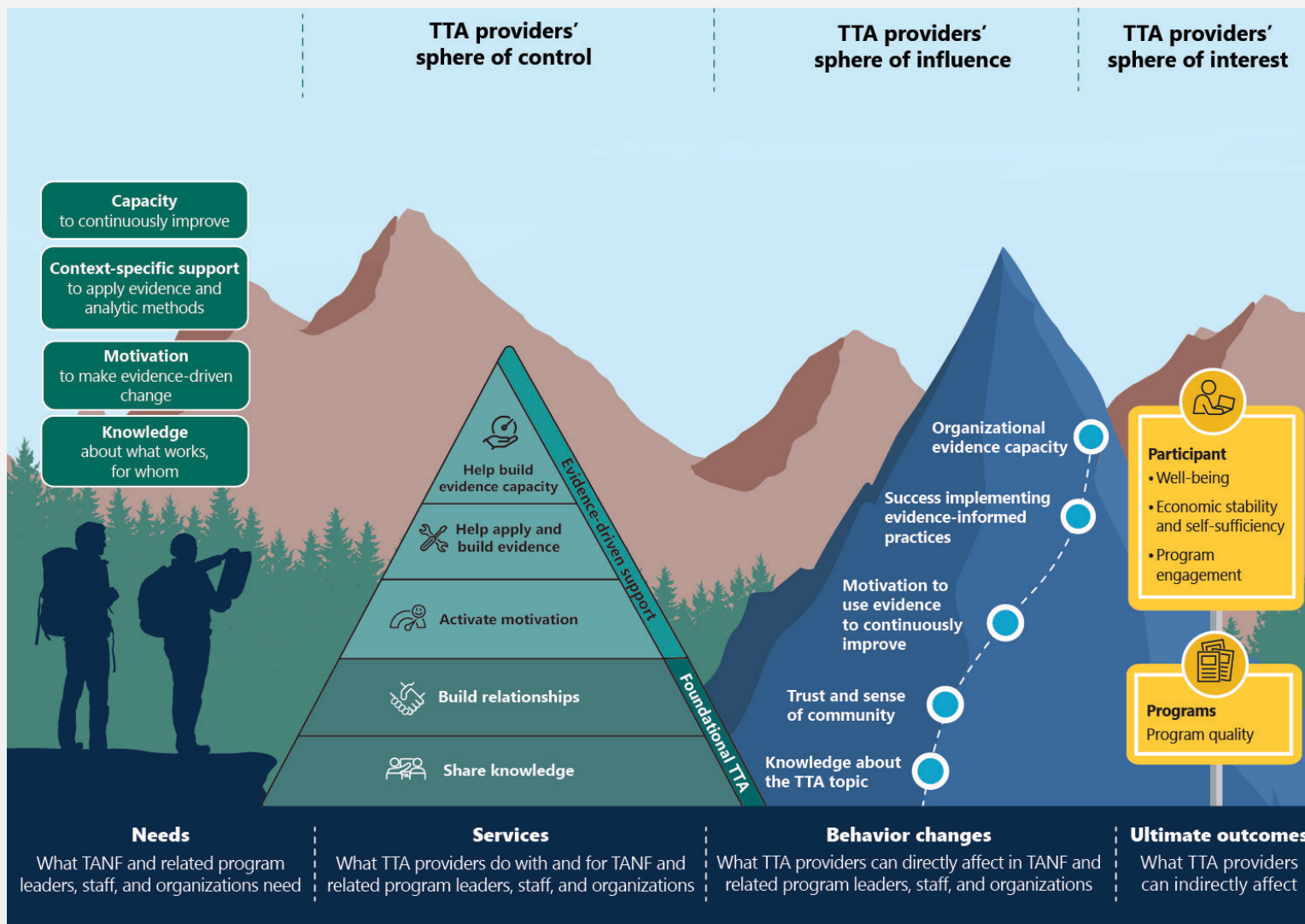
Sources: Project IMPROVE developed the evidence-driven support theory of change based on key insights from the fields of implementation science and behavioral change and decades of experience among Project IMPROVE staff in supporting evidence-driven change in TANF and related programs.

Note: Outcomes of interest to TANF programs are unlikely to be realized through improved TTA alone without broader systemic change.

What's next?

Stay tuned! Project IMPROVE is planning a series of products to assist the TANF field in supporting evidence-driven change through TTA. The next products in this series will cover core components of evidence-driven support, necessary staff competencies, a plan for measuring effectiveness, and examples of using evidence-driven support in TANF programs. Project IMPROVE is funded by the ACF Office of Family Assistance and operated by Mathematica and the Adjacent Possible.

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